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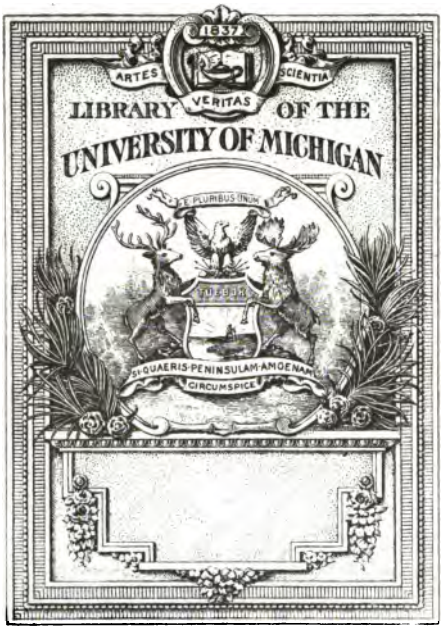

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Two Prisoners

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS are made to Messrs. Harper & Brothers, in whose magazine, *Harper's Young People,* when under the management of the late Alfred B. Starey, some years ago, this story in a condensed form first appeared. The story has been rewritten and amplified.—*T.N.P*

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[See p. 63

"STRAIGHT AWAY THE BIRD FLEW"

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Prisoners

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Two Prisoners

SQUEEZED in between other old dingy houses down a dirty, narrow street paved with cobble-stones, and having, in place of sidewalks, gutters filled with gray slop-water, stood a house, older and dingier than the rest. It had a battered and knock-kneed look, and it leant on the houses on either side of it, as if it were unable to stand up alone. The door was just on a level with the street, and in rainy weather the water poured in and ran through the narrow little passage leaving a silt of mud in which the children played and made tracks. The windows were broken in many places, and were stuffed with old rags, or in some places had bits of oilcloth nailed over the holes. It looked black and disreputable even in that miserable quarter, and it was. Only the poorest and the most unfortunate would

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stay in such a rookery. It seemed to be in charge of or, at least, ruled over by a woman named Mrs. O'Meath, a short, red faced creature, who said she had once been "a wash lady," but who had long given up a profession which required such constant use of water, and who now, so far as could be seen, used no liquid in any way except whiskey or beer.

The dingiest room in this house was, perhaps, the little hall-cupboard at the head of the second flight of rickety stairs. It was small and dim. Its single window looked out over the tops of wretched little shingled houses in the bottom below to the backs of some huge warehouses beyond. The only break in the view of squalor was the blue sky over the top of the great branching elm shading the white back-portico of a large house up in the high part of the town several squares off. In this miserable cupboard, hardly fit to be called a room, unfurnished except with a bed and a broken chair, lived a person—a little girl—if

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one could be said to live who lies in bed all the time. You could hardly tell her age, for the thin face looked much older than the little crooked body. There were lines around the mouth and about the white face which might have been worn by years or only by suffering. The bed-ridden body was that of a child of ten or twelve. The arms and long hands looked as the face did—older—and as she lay in her narrow bed she might have been any moderate age. Her sandy hair was straight and faded; her dark eyes were large and sad. She was known to Mrs. O'Meath and the few people who knew her at all as "Molly." If she had any other name, it was not known. She had no father or mother, and was supposed by the lodgers to be some relative, perhaps a niece, of Mrs. O'Meath. She had never known her father. Her mother she remembered dimly, or thought she did; she was not sure. It was a dim memory of a great brightness in the shape of

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a young woman who was good to her and who seemed very beautiful, and it was all connected with green trees and grass, and blue skies, and birds flying about. The only other memory was of a parting, the lady covering her with kisses, and then of a great loneliness, when she did not come back, and then of a woman dropping her down the stairs—and ever since then she had been lying in bed. At least, that was her belief; she was not sure that the memory was not a dream. At least, all but the bed, that was real.

Ever since she knew anything she had been lying a prisoner in bed, in that room or some other. She did not know how she got there. She must belong in some way to Mrs. O'Meath, for Mrs. O'Meath looked after her and kept others away. It was not much "looking after," at best. Mrs. O'Meath used to bring her her food, such as it was—it was not very much—and attend to her wants, and bring her things to sew, and make her sew

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them. Molly suffered sometimes, for she could not walk; she had never walked—at least, unless that vague recollection was true. She had once or twice asked Mrs. O'Meath about her mother, but she had soon stopped it. It always made Mrs. O'Meath angry, and she generally got drunk after it and was cross with her.

Sometimes when Mrs. O'Meath got drunk she did not come up-stairs at all during the day. She was always kinder to her next day, however, and explained, with much regret, that she had been sick—too sick to get a mouthful for herself even; but other people who lived in the house told Molly that she was "just drunk," and Molly soon got to know the signs. Mrs. O'Meath would be cross and ugly and made her sew hard. Sometimes she used to threaten her with the Poorhouse. Molly did not know what that was; she just knew it was something dreadful (like a prison, she thought). She could not complain, however, for she knew

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very well that what Mrs. O'Meath did was out of charity for her and because she had promised some one to look after her. The little sewing Molly was able to do for her was not anything, she knew. Mrs. O'Meath often told her so. And it made her back ache so to sit up.

The rest of the people in the house were so busy they did not have time to trouble themselves about the child, and Mrs. O'Meath was cross with them if they came "poking about," as she called it.

Molly's companions were two books, or parts of books—one a torn copy of the "Pilgrim's Progress," the other a copy of the "Arabian Night's Entertainment." Neither of them was complete, but what remained she knew by heart. She used to question the women in the house, when they would stop at the door, about things outside; but they knew only about their neighbors and their quarrels and misfortunes—who got drunk; who had a new sofa or frock; who

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had been arrested or threatened by the police, and who had been refused a drink at the bar. Molly's questions about the fairies and great ladies simply set her down with them as a half crazy thing. So Molly was left to her own thoughts. Her little bed was fortunately right by the window, and she could look out over the houses. The pigeons which circled about or walked upon the roofs, pluming themselves and coquetting, and the little brown sparrows which flew around and quarrelled and complained, were her chief companions, and she used to make up stories about them. She soon learned to know them individually, even at a distance, and knew where they belonged. She learned their habits and observed their life. She knew which of them were quiet, and which were blustering; which were shy, and which greedy—most of them were this—and she used to feed them with crumbs on the window-sill. She gave them names out of her books and made up stories about them to her-

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self. They were fairies or genii, and lived under spells; they saw things hidden from the eyes of men, and heard strange music which the ears of men could not catch. One bird, however, interested her more than all the others. It was a bird in a cage, which used to hang outside of the back window of a house not far from hers, but on another street. This bird Molly watched more closely than all the rest, and had more feeling for it. Shut up within the wire bars, whilst all the other birds were flying so free and joyous, it reminded her of herself. It had not been there very long. It was a mocking-bird, and sometimes it used to sing so that she could hear its notes clear and ringing. She felt how miserable it must be, confined behind its bars, when there was the whole sky outside for it to spread its wings under. (It used to sing almost fiercely at times. Molly was sure that it was a prince or princess imprisoned in that form.) Shortly after it first came it sang a great deal, yet Molly knew it was not for

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joy, but only to the sky and the birds outside; for it used to flutter and look frightened and angry whenever the woman leaned out of the window; and sometimes the birds would go and look at it in a curious, half pitying way, and it would try to fly, and would strike against the cage and fall down, and then it would stop singing for awhile. Molly would have loved to pet it, and then have turned it loose and seen it flying away singing. She knew what joy would have filled its little heart to see again the woods and the green fields and pastures and streams, for she knew how she would have felt to see them. She had never seen them in all her life, unless she had not dreamed that dream. Maybe, if it were set free, it would come back sometimes and would sing for her and tell her about freedom and the green fields. Or, maybe, it might even go to Heaven and tell her mother about her.

The bird had not always been in a cage; it had been born in a lilac bush in a great garden,

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with other lilac bushes and tall hollyhocks of every hue, and rose bushes all around it; and it had been brought up there, and had found its mate in an orchard near by, where there were apple trees white with bloom and a little stream bordered with willows, which sometimes looked almost white, too, when the wind blew fresh and lifted the leaves. It had often sung all night long in the moonlight to its mate; and one day, when it was getting a breakfast for the young in its nest in the lilacs, it had been caught in a trap with slats to it; and a man had come and had carried it somewhere in a close basket, and had put it into a thing with bars all around it like a jail, and with a dirty floor; and a woman had bought it and had kept it shut up ever since in a cage. It had come near starving to death for a while, for at first it could not eat the seed and stuff which covered the bottom of its cage, they were so stale; but at last it had to eat, it was so hungry. It grew sick, though, not being

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used to being shut up in such a close, hot place, with people always moving about. Though its owner was kind to it, and talked to it, and was gentle with it, it could not forget its garden and freedom, and it hoped it would die. The woman used to hang it outside of her window, and after she went away it used to sing, hoping that its mate might hear, and, even if it could not release it, at least might come near enough to sing to it and tell it of its love and loneliness, and of the garden and the lilacs and the orchard and the dew. Then, again, when she did not come, it would grow melancholy, and sometimes would try desperately to break out of its prison. Sometimes at night it would dream of the lilacs and would sing. How Molly watched it and listened to it, and how she pitied it and hoped it knew she was there, too!

One other thing that interested Molly greatly was the great gray house over beyond the other houses. She supposed it was a pal-

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ace. There she could see a little girl walking about in the long upper gallery—sometimes alone and sometimes with a colored woman, her nurse. Molly had very keen eyes and could see clearly a long distance; but she could not, of course, see the features of the little girl. She could only tell that she had long brown hair, and wore beautiful dresses, sometimes white, sometimes blue, sometimes pink. She knew she must be beautiful, and wondered if she were a princess. She always pictured her so, and she was always on the watch for her. At times she came out with something in her arms, which Molly knew was a doll, and Molly used to fancy how the doll looked; it must have golden ringlets, and blue eyes, and pink cheeks, and look like a princess. Molly felt sure that the little girl must be a princess. The doll would be dressed in silk and embroidery. She set to work, and with her scraps, left from the pieces Mrs. O'Meath brought her, made a dress and a whole suit of

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"COULD SEE A LITTLE GIRL WALKING ABOUT WITH HER NURSE"

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clothes for it, such as she thought it ought to have. The dress was nothing but a little piece of shiny cambric, trimmed with her silk bits, and the underclothes were only cotton; but she flounced the dress with ends of colored thread and embroidered it beautifully, and folded it up in a piece of paper and stuck it away under the mattress where she kept her treasures.

One day she saw the little girl on the gallery playing with something that was not a doll; it ran around after her and hung on to her skirt. At first Molly could not see it well; but presently the little girl lifted it up in her arms, and Molly saw that it was a little dog, a fat, grayish-yellow puppy. For several days it used to come out and play with its little mistress, or she would play with it, lifting it, carrying it, feeding it, hugging and kissing it. Molly sighed. Oh, how she would have liked to have a little dog like that! Her little room looked darker and gloomier than ever. She

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turned over and tried to sleep, but could not. She was so lonely. She had nothing; she had never had anything. She could not ever hope to have a doll, but, oh, if she had a puppy! Next day she thought of it more than ever, and every day afterwards she thought of it.

She even dreamed about it at night: a beautiful, fat, yellow puppy came and got up by her on the bed and cuddled up against her and went to sleep. She felt its breathing. She actually saved some of her dinner, her bones, next day, and hid them, to feel that she had some food for it, though she was hungry herself. No puppy came, however, and she had to give it up and content herself with looking out for the puppy on the white gallery under the elm beyond the housetops.

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II.

THE big house, the back of which, with its double porticos and great white pillars, Molly could see away up on the hill across the intervening squares, was almost as different from the rickety tenement in which the little cripple lay as daylight is from darkness. It was on one of the highest points in the best part of the city, and was set back in grounds laid off with flower beds and surrounded by a high iron fence. In front it looked out on a handsome park, where fountains played, and at the back, while it looked over a very poor part of the town, filled with small, wretched looking houses, they were so far beneath it that they were almost as much separated from it as though they had been in another city. A high wall and a hedge quite shut off everything in that direction, and it was only from the upper veranda that one

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knew there was any part of the town on that side. Here, however, Mildred, the little girl that Molly saw with her doll and puppy, liked best to play.

Mildred was the daughter of Mr. Glendale, one of the leading men in the city, and she lived in this house in the winter. In the summer she lived in the country, in another house, quite as large as this, but very different. The city house was taller than that in the country, and had finer rooms and handsomer things. But, somehow, Mildred liked the place in the country best. The house in the country was long and had many rooms and curious corners with rambling passages leading to them. It was in a great yard with trees and shrubbery and flowers in it, with gardens about it filled with lilacs and rosebushes, and an orchard beyond, full of fruit trees. Green fields stretched all about it, where lambs and colts and calves played. And when in the country Mildred played out of doors all day long.

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"MILDRED PLAYED OUT-OF-DOORS ALL DAY LONG"

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The city Mildred did not like. She was a little lame and had to wear braces; but the doctors had always said she must be kept out of doors, and she would become strong and outgrow her lameness. Thus she had been brought up in the country, and knew every corner and cranny there. She knew where the robins and mocking-birds nested; the posts where the bluebirds made their homes and brought up their young, and the hollow locusts where the brown Jenny Wrens kept house, with doors so tiny that Mildred could not have gotten her hand in them. In town she felt constrained. There she had to be dressed up and taken to walk by her mammy. In the country she never thought of her lameness; but in town she could not help it. It was hard not to be able to run about and play games like the other children. Rough boys, too, would talk about the braces she had to wear, and sometimes would even laugh at her. So she was shy, and often

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thought herself very wretched. Her mother and her mammy used to tell her that she was better off than most little girls, but Mildred could not think so. At least, they did not have to wear braces, and could run about where they pleased and play games and slide down hills without any one scolding them for ruining their dresses or not being a lady. Mildred often wished she were not a lady, and, though efforts were made to satisfy her least whim, she was dissatisfied and unhappy.

A large playroom was set apart for her in town; and it was fitted up with everything that could be thought of. After the first few days it ceased to give her pleasure. The trouble was that it was all "fixed," her playthings were all "made playthings." She had to play according to rule; she could not do as she pleased. In the country she was free; she could run about the yard or garden, and play with the young birds and chickens and "live" things. One "live"

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thing was, in Mildred's eyes, worth all the "made" ones in the world; and if it was sick or crippled, she just loved it. A lame chicken that could not keep up with the rest of the brood, or a bird that had broken its wing falling out of the nest, was her pet and care. Her playroom in town was filled with dolls and toys of every size and kind, and in every condition, for a doll's condition is different from that of people; it depends not on the house it lives in and the wealth it has, but on the state of its body and features. Mildred's playhouse in the country was a corner of a closet, under the roof. There she used to have war with her mammy, for Mammy was very strict, and had severe ideas. So whenever a sick chicken or lame duck was found crying and tucked up in some of the doll's best dresses there was a battle. "I don't want dolls," Mildred would say. "It don't hurt a doll to break it; they don't care; and it don't help them to mend them; they can't grow. I want something I can

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get well and feed." Indeed, this was what her heart hungered for. What she wanted was company. She felt it more in the city than in the country. In town she had nothing but dolls. She used to think, "Oh, if I just had a chicken or a bird to pet and to love—something young and sweet!" The only place in town where she could do as she pleased was the upper back veranda. Thus she came to like it better than any other spot, and was oftenest there.

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III.

ONE day when Mildred had been dressed up by her mammy and taken out to walk, as she stopped on the edge of the park to rest, a fat, fawn colored puppy, as soft as a ball of wool and as awkward as a baby, came waddling up to her on the street; pulled at her dress; rolled over her feet, and would not let her alone. Mildred was delighted with it. It was quite lame in one of its legs. She played with it, and hugged it, and fed it with a biscuit; and it licked her hands and pinched her with its little white, tack-like teeth. After a while Mammy tried to drive it away, but it would not go, it had taken too great a fancy to its new found playmate to leave her, and, though Mammy slapped at it and scolded it, and took a switch and beat it, it just ran off a little way and then turned around when they moved on and followed them again, coming up

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to them in the most cajoling and enticing way. When they reached home Mammy shut it out of the gate; but it stayed there and cried, and finally squeezed through the fence, scraping its little fat sides against the pickets, and, running up to the porch after them, slipped into the house, and actually ran and hid itself from Mammy under some furniture in the drawing-room.

Mildred begged her father to let her keep the dog. He said she might, until they could find the owner, but that it was a beautiful puppy and the owner would probably want him. Mildred took him to her veranda and played with him, and that night she actually smuggled him into her bed; but Mammy found him and turned him out of so snug a retreat, and Mildred was glad to compromise on having him safely shut up in a box in the kitchen. Her father put an advertisement in the papers and every effort was made to find the owner, but he never appeared, which was perhaps due

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to Mildred's fervent prayers that he might not be found. She prayed hard that he might not come after Roy, as she named him, even if he had to die not to do so.

From that time Mildred found a new life in the city. The two were always together, playing and romping. Roy was the most adorable of puppies, and was always doing the most comical and unexpected things. At times he would act like a baby, and other times would be as full of mischief as a boy.

The upper gallery was Mildred's favorite place. Her mother had given it up to her. There she could run about, without having Mammy scold her for letting Roy scratch up the floor. Roy made havoc in her playroom; he appeared to have a special fondness for doll babies, and would chew their feet off recklessly. He did not have a wholly easy time, however, for Mildred used to insist on dressing him up and making him sleep in her doll's carriage, and, as Roy had the bad taste not to ap-

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preciate these honors, he had to be trained. Mammy had been strict enough with Mildred to give her very sound ideas of discipline, so sometimes Mildred used to coerce Roy till he rebelled with whines. It was all due to affection, however, and Roy used to whine more over the huggings his little mistress gave him than anything else.

"What you squeezin' dat dog so for? Stop dat! Don' you heah him crying?" Mammy used to say.

" 'Tain' any use havin' a dog if you can't squeeze him," Mildred would reply.

Whenever they went out Roy used to go along. Roy was a most inquisitive dog. Curiosity was his besetting sin. It got him into more trouble than anything else. He used to chew up lace curtains, and taste the silk of the chair covers in the parlors just to try them, though anything else would have done just as well; and once or twice he actually tried the bottom of Mammy's dress.

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This was a dreadful mistake for him to make, as he found out, for Mammy allowed no liberties to be taken with her.

"Ain't you got no better sense'n to be chawing my frock, dog?" she used to say. "Ef you ain't, I gwine teach you better." And she did.

When he went out to walk he carried his curiosity to great limits; indeed, as it proved, to a disastrous length. He had grown somewhat and could run about without tripping up over himself every few steps; and as he grew a little older he was always poking into strange yards or around new corners. Once or twice he had come near getting into serious trouble, for large dogs suddenly bounded up from doormats and out of unnoticed corners and appeared very curious to know what business he, a little, fat puppy, had coming into their premises uninvited. In such cases Roy always took out as hard as his little fat legs could carry him; or, if they ran after him, he just curled over on his back, holding up his feet in

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the most supplicating way, till no dog would have had the heart to hurt him.

At last one day he disappeared, and no efforts could find him. He was hunted for high and low; advertisements were put in the papers; a reward was offered, and every exertion was made to find him; but in vain. The last that had been seen of him he was playing out in the street in front of the house, and had gone down a side street. It was in the direction of the worst part of the town, and, after he did not turn up, there was no doubt that he was stolen, or maybe killed. Mildred was inconsolable. She cried herself almost sick. Her father offered to get her another puppy just like Roy; but it did no good; it would not be Roy, she said; it would not be lame. The sight of the dolls which Roy had so often chewed with so much pleasure made her cry afresh. She prayed that he might come back to her.

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IV.

THAT very afternoon on which Roy disappeared Molly had just got her dinner—a little soup, with a knuckle-bone in it, and a piece of bread—and she was thinking what a pity the bone was so large, as she was hungry, when she heard something on the staircase outside. The door had been left slightly open by the woman who had brought the dinner, and the sound was quite distinct; it sounded like something dragging up the steps. She thought it was a rat, for there were a great many of them about, and she was wishing the door was shut, for she did not want it to come into her room, and, besides, it was cold. But as she could not reach the door, she was about to begin on her dinner. Just as she started, however, she heard a soft and low step at her door, and she looked up. There came a dear, fat, yellow-gray puppy, with a black

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nose, walking in just as straight and solemnly as if he were a doctor and had a visit to pay. She did not dare to move for fear he would be frightened and go out; but he did not trouble himself. Walking straight on, he took a glance around as if to assure himself that this was the place he wanted, and then, looking at her, he gave a queer little switch of his tail, which twisted half his body in the funniest way, and, quickening his pace, came trotting up to her bed and reared up to try and climb up on it. Molly put her hand over on it, and he began to lick it rapidly and whimper in his efforts to get up. She gave a little cry of delight and, catching him, pulled him up on the bed. He immediately began to walk over her and lick her face. It was the first time she had ever been kissed in her life that she remembered. The next thing he did was to poke his little head into her soup bucket, and begin to eat as if it belonged to him. He finished the soup and began at the bone. This gave him the great-

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est delight. He licked and nibbled and chewed it; got his fat paws in, and worked over it. Molly, too, got the greatest pleasure out of it. She forgot that she was hungry.

Suddenly he lay down and went fast asleep snuggled up against her. Molly felt as if he were a little fat baby curled up in her arm. Her life seemed suddenly to have opened. The only trouble was the fear that Mrs. O'Meath might take him away and drive him out. To prevent this was her dream. She thought of hiding him, but this was difficult; besides, she wanted to tell Mrs. O'Meath about him.

The puppy stayed with her that night, sleeping beside her, and snuggling up against her like a little child. Molly had never spent so happy a night.

Next morning by light he was awake hunting for his knuckle-bone, and when he got it went to work at it. In the midst of Molly's

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reflections Mrs. O'Meath walked in. Her eye fell on Roy, and Molly's heart sank.

"What's that dirty dog doin' in this room?"

Roy answered for himself. The hair on his back rose and he began to bark. Molly tried to check him.

"Where did ye git him?"

"Oh, Mrs. O'Meath, please, madam, let me keep him. He came from heaven. I haven't anything, and I want him so. Hush! You must not bark at Mrs. O'Meath. Hush, sir!"

But Roy just pulled loose, and, standing astride of Molly, barked worse than ever.

"Not I, indeed. Out he goes. 'Ave I to be slavin' meself to death for the two of you? It isn't enough for the wan of you, and him barkin' at me like that."

"Oh, Mrs. O'Meath, please, madam! I will sew for you all my life, and do everything you want me to do," cried Molly. "O God, don't let her take him away from me!" she prayed.

Whether it was that Mrs. O'Meath was

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troubled by the great, anxious eyes of the little girl, and did not have the heart to tear the dog away from her, or whether she thought that perhaps Roy was a piece of property worth preserving, she did not take him away. She simply contented herself with abusing him for "a loud-mouthed little baste," and threatening to "teach him manners by choking the red, noisy tongue out his empty head." She actually brought him a new knuckle-bone at dinner time, which greatly modified his hostility. No puppy can resist a knuckle-bone.

Roy had been with Molly four days, and they had been the sweetest days of the crippled girl's life. He had got so that he would play with his bones on the floor, rolling them as a child does a ball. He would come when Molly called him, and would play with her, and he slept on her bed beside her. One day he walked out of the room and went down the steps. Molly called and called, but to no pur-

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pose. He had disappeared; he was gone. Molly's heart was almost broken. Her room suddenly became a prison; her life was too dark to bear.

Mildred had prayed and prayed in vain that Roy might come back to her, and had at length confided to Mammy that she did not believe he was coming, and she was not going to pray any more. She was sure now that she was the most wretched child in the world. She took no pleasure in anything, even in the finest new doll she had ever seen. However, she was playing with her doll on the front portico that morning when Roy came walking up the steps as deliberately as if he had just gone out. She gave a little shriek of delight, and ran forward. Seeing her, he came trotting up, twisting himself as he always did when he was pleased. She called her mother. There was a great welcoming, and Roy was petted like the returned prodigal. Mildred determined never again to let him get out of her sight.

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Looking out of her little window next day Molly saw her little girl on the white gallery romping with a dog, and her heart was bitter with envy. She glanced down at the cage below her, and the mocking-bird, which, whilst she had the puppy she had almost forgotten, was drooping on his perch.

Mildred, however, though she watched Roy closely, did not have a wholly easy time. After this Roy had a wandering fever. One day he was playing in the yard with Mildred, who was about to give him a roll she had. Near where they were playing stood a rose-bush covered with great red roses. Mildred thought it would be great fun to take a rose and tease Roy with it. So she turned and broke off from the bush one of the finest. It took some little time, and when she turned back, Roy, whether offended at being neglected or struck by some recollection, had squeezed through the fence, and started down the street. Mildred called after him, but he paid no attention

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to her. She opened the gate and ran after him.

"Roy, Roy!" she called. "Here, Roy, come here."

But Roy took no heed of her; he just trotted on. When she ran faster he ran, too, just as if she were a stranger. He turned into another street and then another. She had to hurry after him for fear she might lose him. He reached a dirty little narrow street and turned in. She was not far behind him, and she saw the door he went into. She ran to it. He was going up the stairs, climbing steadily one after another. As she did not see anybody to catch him she went on up after him. She saw him enter a door that was slightly ajar, and when she reached it she started to follow him in, but at the sight that caught her eye she stopped on the threshold. There was Roy up on a bed licking the face of a little girl, and acting as if he were wild with joy.

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V.

MOLLY'S day had been very dark. It was dark without and within. She had suffered a great deal. She had seen the little girl on the gallery playing with her puppy and running about, and her own life had seemed very wretched. Mrs. O'Meath was drunk and had threatened her with the Poorhouse, and she had not got any breakfast; she was very unhappy.

It seemed to her that she and the bird in the cage outside the window were the most wretched things in the world. She thought of her mother, and wondered if she should go to Heaven if she would know her. Perhaps, she would not want her. She lay back and looked around her little dark room, and then shut her eyes and began to pray very hard. It was not much of a prayer, just a fragment, beginning, "Our Father, who art in Heaven"—

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which had somehow stuck in her memory, and which she always used when she wanted anything. Just then she heard a noise outside on the steps. It came pulling up step by step, and Roy trotted in at the open door and came bouncing and twisting over toward the bed. In an instant she had him on the bed, and he was licking her face and walking over her. She heard a noise at the door and was aware that some one was there, and, looking up, she saw standing in the door the most beautiful creature she had ever beheld—a little girl with brown curls and big brown eyes. She was bareheaded and beautifully dressed, and her eyes were wide open with surprise. In her hand she held a small green bough, with a wonderful red thing on the end. Molly thought she must be a fairy or an angel.

Mildred had stopped for a moment and was looking at Molly.

In her sympathy for the poor little thing lying there she forgot all about Roy. Her eyes were full of pity.

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"How do you do?" she said, coming softly to the bedside.

"Oh, very well, thank you," said Molly. "My dog has come back."

"Why, is he your dog, too? He's my dog," said Mildred.

The face of the crippled child fell.

"Is he? I thought he was mine. I hoped he was. He came in one day, and I didn't know he belonged to anybody but me. I had been lying here so long I hoped he would always stay with me."

The face looked so sad. The large eyes looked wistful, and Mildred was sorry that she had claimed the dog. She thought for a moment.

"I will give him to you," she said, eagerly.

Molly's eyes lit up.

"Oh, will you? Thank you so much."

"Have you got anything to feed him on?" asked Mildred.

"Yes, some bones I put away for him." She

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pulled from under the side of the bed two bones wrapt in paper, and Roy at once seized them and began to gnaw at them.

"I have a roll here I will give him," said Mildred. "I shall have my lunch when I get back."

She held out her roll. Molly's eyes glistened.

"Can I have a little piece of it?" she asked timidly; "I haven't had any breakfast."

Mildred's eyes opened wide.

"Haven't had any breakfast, and nearly lunch time! Are you going to wait till luncheon?"

" 'Luncheon?' What's that?" said Molly. "I get dinner generally; but I am afraid I mayn't get any to-day. Mrs. O'Meath is drunk."

She spoke of it as if it were a matter of course. Mildred's face was a study. The idea of such a thing as not getting enough to eat had never crossed her mind. She could not take it in.

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"Here, take this; eat all of it. I will get my mother to send you some dinner right away, and every day." She took hold of Molly's thin hand and stroked it in a caressing, motherly sort of way. "What is your name?" She leaned over her and stroked her little dry brow, as her mother did hers when she had a headache.

"Molly."

"Molly what?"

"I don't believe I've got any other name," said Molly. "My mother was named Mary."

"Where is she?" asked Mildred.

"She's dead."

"And your father?"

"Kilt!" said Molly. "'T least I reckon he was. Mrs. O'Meath says he was. I don't know whether he's dead or not."

Mildred's eyes opened wide. The idea of any one not knowing whether or not her father was living!

"Who is Mrs. O'Meath?" she asked.

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"She's the lady 't takes care of me."

"Your nurse?"

"N— I don't know. She ain't my mother."

"Well, she don't take very good care of you, I think," said Mildred, looking around with an air of disapproval.

"Oh! she's drunk to-day," explained Molly, busily eating her bread.

"Drunk!" Mildred's eyes opened with horror.

"Yes. She'll be all right to-morrow." Her eyes, over the fragment of roll yet left, were fastened on the rose which Mildred, in her chase after Roy, had forgotten all about and still held in her hand.

"What is that?" she asked, presently.

"What? This rose?" Mildred held it out to her.

"A rose!" The girl's eyes opened wide with wonder, and she took it in her thin hands as carefully as if it had been of fragile glass. "Oh! I never saw one before."

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"'ARE YOU A PRINCESS?' ASKED MOLLY"

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"Never saw a rose before! Why, our garden and yard are full of them. I break them all the time."

"Are you a princess?" asked Molly, gazing at her.

Mildred burst out into a clear, ringing laugh.

"No. A princess!"

Molly was perhaps a little disappointed, or perhaps she did not wholly believe her. She stroked the rose tenderly, and then held it out to Mildred, though her eyes were still fastened on it hungrily.

"You can have it," said Mildred, "for your own."

"Oh! For my own? My very own?" exclaimed the cripple, her whole face lit up. Mildred nodded.

"Oh! I never thought I should have a rose for my own, for my very own," she declared, holding it against her cheek, looking at it, smelling it and caressing it all at once, whilst

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Mildred looked on with open-eyed wonder and enjoyment.

Mildred asked a great many questions, and Molly told her all she knew about herself. She had been lying there in that little room for years without ever going out, and she had never seen the country. Mildred learned all about her life there; about the birds outside and the bird in the cage. Mildred could see it from the window when she climbed upon the bed. She thought of the roses in her garden and of the birds that sang around her home, flying about among the trees, and to think that Molly had never seen them! Her heart ached. It dawned upon her that maybe she could arrange to have her see it. She asked what she would rather have than anything in the world.

"In the whole world?" asked Molly.

"Yes, in the whole world."

Molly thought profoundly. "I would rather have that bird out there in the cage," she said.

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Mildred was surprised and a little disappointed.

"Would you?" she asked, almost in a whisper. "Well, I will ask my mamma to give me some money to buy it for you. I've got to go now."

Roy, who had been asleep, suddenly opened his eyes and looked lazily at her. He crawled a little closer up to Molly and went asleep again.

"Here," said Molly, "take this."

She pulled out of her little store inside the bed where she kept her treasures concealed a little bundle. It was her doll's wardrobe. Mildred opened it.

"Why, how beautiful! Where did you get it? It would just fit one of my new dolls."

"I made it," said Molly.

"You did? I wish I could make anything like that," said Mildred, admiring the beautiful work.

"Would you mind something?" Molly

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asked, timidly. "Would you let me kiss you?" She looked at her pathetically.

Mildred leaned over and kissed the poor little pale lips.

"Thank you," said Molly, with a flush on her pale cheeks.

"Good-bye. I will come again," said Mildred, gravely. The eyes of the crippled girl brightened.

"Oh! will you! Thank you."

Mildred leaned over and kissed her again.

As she walked down the dark stairs and out of the narrow damp street into the sunlight she seemed to enter a new world. It came to her how different her lot was, not only from that of the poor little crippled girl lying in that dark prison up that rickety stair, but from many and many others who wanted nearly everything she had in such abundance. She almost trembled to think how ungrateful and complaining she had been, and a new feeling seemed to take possession of her.

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VI.

DURING the hour of Mildred's absence there had been great excitement at her home. They thought she was lost, and they were all hunting for her everywhere when she walked in with her little bundle in her hand. She might ordinarily have been punished for going off without permission, but now they were all too glad to see her back, and she had such a good excuse. Even Mammy confined herself to grumbling just a little. Mildred rushed to her mother's room and told her everything about her visit—about Molly and everything connected with her. She drew so graphic a picture of the little cripple's condition that her mother at once had a basket of food prepared and ordered her carriage. Mildred begged to go with her, so they set out at once. She had taken notice of the house, and, after

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driving up one or two streets, they found the right one. She asked her mother to let her carry the basket. When they entered the room Mildred's mother found it even worse than Mildred had pictured it; but a half hour's vigorous work made a great change, and that night, for the first time in many years, Molly slept in a clean bed and in as much comfort as her poor little broken body would admit.

That night Mildred could hardly sleep for happiness. She had the money to buy the mocking-bird. Inquiry was made next day on the street where Mildred described the bird as being. It was found that the only bird on the block belonged to a Mrs. Johnson, "a widow lady who took in sewing." She lived in the third story back room of a certain house and had not been there very long, so no one could tell anything about her except that she owned "a mocker." This, however, was all that was needed, and Mildred was promised that next morning the bird should be bought

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and she should be allowed to take it to Molly with her own hands. She planned just the way in which she would surprise her.

Next morning a servant was sent around to buy the bird. When he returned Mildred's high hopes were all dashed to the ground. The owner did not wish to sell the bird. The money was doubled and the servant was sent back. The answer came back: "The bird was not for sale." Mildred was grievously disappointed. She could not help crying.

"Send to the dealer's and buy two birds," said her father.

"Perhaps the bird is a pet," suggested her mother gently.

Mildred thought Molly did not want any bird—she wanted that one, though she herself did not understand just why, unless it was that she knew that one could sing.

"Then Molly is unreasonable," said Mildred's father.

Mildred was unreasonable, too. If Molly

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did not want any other bird she did not want it either. She persuaded her mammy to walk around through the street where the woman with the mocking-bird lived. She knew the house. Just as she passed it the door opened and a woman came down the steps with a bundle. She was dressed in black and looked very poor, but she also looked very kind, and Mildred, who was gazing at the door as she came out, asked her timidly:—"Do you know Mrs. Johnson?"

"Why, I am one Mrs. Johnson," she said. "Whom do you mean?"

"The lady that has the mocking-bird," said Mildred.

"I have a mocking-bird."

"Have you? I mean the lady that has a mocking-bird and won't sell it," said Mildred, sadly.

The woman looked down at her kindly and for a moment did not answer. Then she said:—"What do you know about it?"

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"I wanted to buy it," said Mildred.

"I am sorry I could not sell it to you," said Mrs. Johnson kindly. "The bird is all the company I have, and besides I don't think it is well. It has not been singing much lately."

"Hasn't it?" asked Mildred. "I wanted it for Molly. She wants it."

"Who is Molly?"

"The little crippled girl that lives around that way." She pointed. "She lies at a window away, way up. You can almost see her out of your window where the cage hangs. She saw the bird from her window where she lies and that's the reason she wants it."

The woman looked down at the little girl thoughtfully. The big eyes were gazing up at her with a look of deep trouble in them.

"You can have the bird," she said suddenly. "Wait, I will get it." And before Mildred could take in her good fortune she had gone back into the house, and a second later she brought down the cage.

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Mildred had not just understood that it was to be brought her then, and a new difficulty presented itself.

"But I haven't any money," she said.

"I don't want any money," said the poor lady.

"But I can send it to you."

"I don't want any; I give it to you."

Mildred was not sure that she ought to accept the bird this way. "Do you think mamma would mind it?" she asked earnestly.

"Not if she ever had a crippled child," said the woman.

"She had. But I'm well now," said Mildred.

She took the cage and bore it down the street, talking to her mammy of the joy Molly would have when she took the bird to her. The poor woman suddenly turned and went back into the house and up the stairs, and a second later was leaning out of the window scanning one by one every window in sight.

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Mildred and her mammy soon found the rickety house where Molly lived, and as Mildred climbed the stairs to Molly's room, though she walked as softly as she could, her heart was beating so she was afraid Molly might hear it. Curious faces peeped at her as she went up, for the visit to Molly of the day before was known, but Mildred did not mind them. She thought only of Molly and her joy. She reached the door and opened it softly and peeped in. Molly was leaning back on her pillow very white and languid; but she was looking for her, and she smiled eagerly as she caught her eye. Mildred walked in and held up the cage. Molly gave a little scream of delight and reached out her hands.

"Oh, Mildred, is it—?" She turned and looked out of the window at the place where it used to hang. Yes, it was the same.

Mildred had a warm sensation about the heart, which was perfect joy.

"Where shall I put it?" she asked. "He

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looks droopy, but Mrs. Johnson says he used to sing all the time. He is not hungry, because he has feed in the cage. I don't know what is the matter with him."

"I do," said Molly, softly.

She showed where she wanted the cage, and Mildred climbed up and put it in the open window. Then she propped Molly up. She had never seen Molly's eyes so bright, and her cheeks had two spots of rich color in them. She looked really pretty. She put her arm around the cage caressingly. The frightened bird fluttered and uttered a little cry of fear.

"Never mind," murmured Molly, softly, as she pulled at the catch. "It is only a minute more, and there will be the fields and the sky."

The peg was drawn out and she opened the door wide. The bird did not come out; it just fluttered backwards and forwards. Molly pushed the cage a little further out of the window. The bird got quiet. It turned its head

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and looked out of the door. Mildred had clasped her hands tightly, and was looking on with speechless surprise. She thought it might be some spell of Molly's. The bird hopped out of the cage on to the window-sill and stood for a second in a patch of sunlight. It craned its neck and gazed all around curiously; turned and looked at the cage, and then fastened its eye steadily on Molly, shook itself in the warm air, gave a little trill, almost a whimper, and suddenly tore away in the sunlight.

Mildred gave a little gasp, "Oh!" But Molly did not move a muscle. Straight away the bird flew, at first up and then on over the black houses and the smoke toward the blue sky over Mildred's home, his wings beating the fresh spring air, on, on, growing smaller to the sight, flying straight for the open country—a mere speck—till at last he faded from sight. Molly lay motionless, with her gaze still on the fair blue sky where he had disap-

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peared, as if she could still see him. Her lips had been moving, but now were stilled.

"There!" she said, softly. "At last!" and sank back on the pillow, her eyes closed, her face full of deep content. Mildred sat and gazed at her, at first with a vague wonder and then almost with awe. A new idea seemed to enter her mind. Could Molly be sending the mocking-bird to heaven with a message to her mother?

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VII.

THE poor lady who had given Mildred the bird was still leaning out of her window studying the backs of the houses on the other street down below hers in the direction the little girl had gone, when at the top window of one of the oldest and most tumbled-down houses there was a movement, and a flash of sunlight on something caught her eye. Yes, that was the place. Looking hard, she could make out what was going on. She could see the cage set on the window sill and two little figures on the bed at the open window. It was a flash of sunshine on the cage which had reached her. She knew now where the bird would hang, and if it ever sang again she would be able to hear it faintly. In the distant past she had heard birds singing at least that far off. She was watching intently, when to her astonishment

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she saw the bird step out on the sill into the sunlight, and the next second it dashed away. It had escaped! With a gasp she watched it until it rose above the housetops and disappeared far away in the depths of the blue sky.

When it had quite disappeared she looked back at the window. The two little figures were there as still as ever. There was no excitement. Could they have set the bird free on purpose? She gazed at them long and earnestly, then turned and looked back at the sky where the bird had faded from her view. It was deep and fathomless, without a speck. Her thoughts followed the lost bird—away over the housetops into the country, into the past, into the illimitable heavens. Her life was all spread out before her like a panorama. She saw a beautiful country of green fields, where lambs skipped and played; gardens filled with flowers, and orchards with clouds of bloom, where bees hummed all day

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long and birds sang in the leafy coverts. A little girl was playing there as free as the birds; as joyous as the lambs. In time the little girl grew to be a big girl. And one day a lad came up the country road and stopped at the gate and looked across at her. He was shy, but pleasant looking, and after a moment he opened the gate and came straight up to her and asked for lodging. He was unlike any one else she had ever known. He had come from a State far away. He looked into her eyes, and she felt a sudden fear lest her father would not take him in. He was, however, given lodging, and he stayed on and on, and helped her father on the farm. He knew more than any one she had ever seen, and he bought her books and taught her. The girl's whole life seemed to open up under his influence, and in his presence. She used to wander with him through the pleasant woods; among the blossoms; in the moonlight; reading with him the books he brought her; find-

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ing new realms of which she had never dreamed. Then one evening he had leaned over, and put his arm around her and begun to speak as he had never spoken before. Her happiness was almost a pain, and yet it was only such pain as the bud must feel when the warm sun unfolds its petals and with its deep eyes seeks its fragrant heart. The young girl's life suddenly opened as that rose opens; and for a time she seemed to walk in paradise. Then clouds had gathered; talk of war disturbed the peace of her quiet life. Her lover was on one side, her father on the other. One day the storm burst. War came. Her husband felt that he must go. Her father said that if she went with him she could never more come back. Her heart was torn asunder and yet she could not hesitate. Her place was with her husband. So she had parted from her father; she half fainting with sorrow, he white and broken, yet both sustained by the sense of duty. For a time there had been great happiness in a

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baby girl, who, though feeble, was the light of her eyes. The doctors said if she were taken care of she would outgrow her trouble. Then came a bitterer parting than the first; her husband went off to the war, leaving her a stranger in a strange land, with only her baby. Even this was not the worst. Shortly came the terrible tidings that her husband had been desperately wounded and left in the enemy's hands. She must go to him. She learned at the last moment that she could not take her child with her. Yet it was life or death. She must go. Then Providence had seemed to open the way. Unexpectedly she met an old friend; a woman who had been a servant of her mother's in the old days back at her old home. Though she had one weakness, one fault, she was good and kind, and she had always been devoted to her. She would take care of her child. So she left the little girl with her, together with the few pieces of jewelry she possessed. She herself set off

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to go through the lines to her husband. It was a long journey. In time she arrived at the place where he had been. But it was too late. He was gone. All that was left was an unmarked mound in a field of mounds. Since that time there had been for her nothing but graves. Just then the lines were closely drawn, and before she could get back through them she had heard from the woman that her child was dead of a pestilence that had broken out, and she herself dying. So she was left. In her loneliness she had turned to her father. She could go to him. He, too, was dead. The war had killed him. His property had melted away. The old home had passed from his hands and he himself had gone, one of the unnamed and unnumbered victims.

When at length the war had closed the widowed and childless woman had gone back to where she had left her child, to find at least its grave. But even this was denied her. There had been a pestilence, and in war so

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many are falling that a child's death makes no difference except to those who love it. The mother could not find even the grave to put a flower on.

Since that time she had lived alone—always alone except for the memories of the past. Her gift with her needle enabled her to make enough to keep body and soul together. But her heart hungered for that it had lost.

Of late her memories had gone back much to her girlhood; when she had walked among the fruit trees with the lambs frisking and the birds singing about her. She had bought the mocking-bird to sing to her. It bore her back to the time when her lover had walked beside her; and there had been no thought of war, with its blood and its graves. She tried to blot out that dreadful time; to obliterate it from her memory; to bridge it over, except for the memory of her child—with its touch, its voice, its presence. Always that called her, and she prayed—if she only might find its grave.

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For this she had come back once more to the place where she had left it, and where she knew its grave was. She had not found it; but had put flowers on many unmarked little mounds; and had blessed with her tender eyes many unknown little crippled children.

The mention of the crippled girl had opened her heart. And now when she lifted her head she was in some sort comforted. She rose and took up her bundle, and once more went down into the street. She determined to go and see the little crippled child who had let her bird go.

She could not go, however, till next day, and when she went she learned that the child had been taken away by a rich lady and sent to a hospital. This was all the people she saw knew. She did not see Mrs. O'Meath.

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VIII.

AS SOON as Molly could be moved she was taken from the hospital out to Mildred's country home. She had pined so to see the country that the doctors said it might start her towards recovery and would certainly do her good. So Mildred's mother had closed her town house earlier than usual and moved out before Easter.

From the very beginning it seemed to do her good. The fresh air and sunshine; the trees just putting on their spring apparel; the tender green grass; the flowers, and the orchards filled with bloom, all entranced her and invigorated her. She loved to be out of doors, to lie and look at the blue sky, with the great white clouds sailing away up in it (she said they were great snow islands that floated about in the blue air), and to listen to the songs of the birds flitting about in

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the shrubbery and trees. She said she felt just as that mocking bird must have done that day when he stood in the warm sunshine and saw the blue sky above him when he got out of prison. Mildred used to take her playthings and stay with her, and read to her out of her story books, whilst Roy would lie around and look lazy and contented. There was no place where he loved to sleep so well as on Molly's couch, snuggled up against her.

One afternoon she was lying on her couch out in the yard. Mildred was sitting by her, and Roy was asleep against her arm. It was Easter Sunday, and everything was unusually quiet and peaceful. There had been a good deal of talk about Easter. Molly did not know what Easter was, and she had been wondering all day. Mildred herself had mentioned it several times. She had a beautiful new dress, and Mrs. Johnson, the lady who had given her the mocking bird, and for whom her

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mother had gotten a place, had made it. Still to Molly's mind this was not all that Easter meant. Molly had heard something about somebody coming back from the dead. This had set her to thinking all day. She knew about Sunday, because that day people did not go to work as on other days; and could not go into the barroom by the front door, and some of them went to church. But Easter was different. Something strange was to happen. But nothing had happened. Mildred had been to church with her mother; but no one had come. Even the poor lady who had made Mildred's dress, and who had been invited to come out to the country and spend Easter, had not appeared; and had written that she could not come until the evening, if she could get off at all. So Molly was puzzled and a little disappointed. She had waited all day and no one had come. She must have misunderstood or else they had told her a lie. Now Mildred was sitting by her.

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"Mildred," she said. Mildred leaned over her.

"Well, what is it?"

"Do you think my mother will know me when I get to Heaven? I was so little when she went away."

Mildred told her that a mother would know her child always. "Just so." This seemed to satisfy her.

A mocking-bird on a lilac bush began to sing. It sang until the air seemed to be filled with music.

"Molly," said Mildred, "I wonder if that is not your mocking-bird?" Molly's eyes turned slowly in that direction.

"I think maybe he went to Heaven that day, to my mother," she said, softly.

"And told your mother that you set him free?"

Suddenly Molly spoke, slowly and softly.

"Mildred, I am very happy," she said. "If

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I had all the money in the world, do you know what I would do with it?"

"No. What?" Mildred took her hand and leaned over her. She did not answer immediately. She was looking at the far away horizon beyond the blue hills, where the softly fading light was turning the sunset sky into a land of purple and gold. Presently she said:—

"I would buy up all the birds in the world that are in cages—every one—and set them free." Mildred looked at her in vague wonder.

"Mildred, what is Easter?" she asked suddenly. Mildred was astonished. The idea of any one not knowing what Easter was!

"Why Easter was the time when——" She paused to find just the word she wanted, and as it did not come to her mind she began to think what Easter really was. It was harder to explain than she had thought. Of course, she knew; but she just could not remember exactly all about it. Oh! Yes——

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"Why Easter is the time when you have nice things—a new dress and don't have to give up butter or candy, or any thing you want to eat—don't you know?"

This was beyond Molly's experience. She did not know. Mildred was not satisfied with her explanation. She added to it. "Why, it's the day Christ rose from the dead—Don't you know?"

"Is that a fairy tale?" asked Molly.

"No, of course not; it's the truth." Mildred looked much shocked. Molly looked a little disappointed.

"Oh! I was in hopes it was a fairy tale. Tell me about it."

Mildred began, and told the story; at first in vague sentences merely to recall it to Molly's memory, and then as she saw the interest of her hearer, in full detail with the graphic force of her own absolute belief. She had herself never before felt the reality of the story as she did now, with Molly's eager eyes fastened on

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her face; her white face filled with wonder and earnestness, her thin hand holding hers, and at times clutching it until it almost hurt her. She began with the birth in the manger and ended with the rising in the garden.

"And did he sure 'nough come back—what you call rise again?" said Molly presently. Mildred nodded. She was still under the spell of Molly's vivid realization of it.

"And where is He now?"

"He went back up to Heaven." Mildred looked up in the sky. Molly too looked up and scanned the pale blue cloudless depths.

"Can He send back anybody he wants?"

Mildred thought so.

"Then I'm going to ask Him to send back my mother to me," she said. "I did not know about Him. I always asked God; but I never thought He would do it. I always thought He had too much to do to think about a poor little thing like me—except once. I asked Him not to let Mrs. O'Meath take Roy and

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He didn't. But I never asked that other one. Maybe that's the reason He never did it before. He'll know about it and maybe He'll do it, because He was a little child too once, and he must know how bad I want her." She ducked her head down, squeezed her eyes tightly, and remained so about two minutes.

This was a little too complicated for Mildred's simple theology. She was puzzled; but she watched Molly with a vague, curious interest. Molly opened her eyes and gazed up to the skies with an air of deep relief, not unmingled with curiosity.

"Now, I'm going to see if He'll do it," she said. "I've asked Him real hard three times, and if He wont do it for that I aint ever goin' to ask Him no more." Mildred felt shocked, but somehow Molly's eagerness impressed her, and she too followed Molly's gaze up into the deep ether, and sat in silence. Roy moved his head a little and licked Molly's hand

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"'MOTHER,' SHE WHISPERED"

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gently. The mocking-bird sang sweetly in the softening light. The only other sound was that of footsteps coming softly across the grass. Mildred, half turning, could see from where she sat. Her mother and another person, who, as she came near, Mildred saw was Mrs. Johnson, the poor woman who had given her the mocking-bird, were coming together. As they came nearer Mildred's mother was just saying:—

"This is the little girl who turned the bird loose."

Molly was still watching the far off skies, too earnest to hear the new comers. Mrs. Johnson's eyes fell on her. She stopped; started on again; stopped again, and drew her hand across her forehead, as if she were dreaming and trying to awake. The next second with a cry she was down on her knees beside Molly's lounge, her arms around her.

"My baby——!"

The cripple lay quite still, gazing into her

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